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ABSTRACT

This report is a compilation of strategies and preventive devices that have been tested by school administrators and found to be effective in the prevention of vandalism. The report discusses which personnel should be responsible for controlling vandalism, describes construction materials, and outlines policies for controlling and deterring vandalism. (Author/JF)

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VANDALISM IN SCHOOLS
A $200 Million Dollar Problem

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VANDALISM IN SCHOOLS
A $200 Million Dollar Problem

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STRATEGIES TO PREVENT VANDALISM

This bulletin on School Vandalism is issued in response to inquiries on available materials. It represents a compilation of strategies and preventive devices that have been tested by experienced school administrators and found to be effective.

Among the areas discussed in this monograph are such topics as: WHO IS IN CHARGE OF VANDALISM CONTROL? ...WHAT ABOUT ARCHITECTURAL PLANNING AND CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS? ...WHAT IS YOUR STATED POLICY FOR CONTROL? ...WHAT ARE THE BEST DETERRENTS TO VANDALISM?

Your reactions to this material and further suggestions for control are cordially invited.

--the editors

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SCHOOL VANDALISM

Introduction

Superintendent Charles Croston of Sandy Union High School District recently asked whether any helpful material on the subject of vandalism to school property might be available from the Oregon School Study Council. The Study Council contacted knowledgeable individuals who have responsibilities related to the prevention and control of vandalism. In addition to the contact with the Educational Council of Facility Planners, individual contacts were made with Leonard Schmurr of the Special Investigation Department, Portland Public Schools; Raymond G. Hudson, Bureau of Plant Operation, City of New York; and Harry B. Saunders, Director of School Building Planning, Los Angeles City School District.

It was soon discovered that this problem accounts for a $200,000,000 loss for school districts in our country. Many suburban and smaller school districts that have been unaffected by this problem are now experiencing challenges previously unknown.

It is easy to say that vandalism is a symptom of other problems and that if these basic problems are first solved, vandalism will disappear. The basic problems of which vandalism is a symptom are in no way the exclusive domain of the local school district. The school, as a segment of our total society, is adversely affected by disturbances,

defiance, and destruction typical of the larger social order. In fact, it is surprising with all the poor examples found in adult society, that the problem of vandalism has not come sooner and that it has not been more severe in many of our schools. In places where vandalism is not a serious concern it is a credit (and some good fortune) to the local school's professional staff and to the local community.

However, no district can rest on its oars in this regard. Since outbreaks may be sudden and disruptive, there are school districts that have experienced the problem and that have some practical advice to share with those less experienced.

The material which follows was prepared by Margaret Nielsen, Editor in the Bureau of Educational Research and Service, who supplemented the suggestions solicited from school districts with a search of the literature to originate this monograph for members of the Oregon School Study Council.

Readers are invited to share reactions to this monograph and urged to send other ideas or helpful experiences to the Oregon School Study Council for follow-up purposes.

Kenneth A. Erickson
Executive Secretary
Oregon School Study Council

VANDALISM IN SCHOOLS--A $200 Million Dollar Problem

Vandalism in the schools has become widespread and expensive in the past few years. Recent figures estimate the national cost of school vandalism at $200 million a year; in 1969, the U. S. Office of Education had placed the estimate at $100 million.[1]

Arson alone cost the Los Angeles schools $850,000 from 1965-1969; vandalism cost the New York City schools $2.7 million in 1968; windows alone (43,728 of them) cost Washington, D. C. almost $300,000 to replace in 1967-68.[2] New York City high school principals consider the situation as verging on anarchy. "In an unarticulated assumption that the student perpetrator can get away with anything, our Board of Education has virtually abdicated its responsibility for the safe and orderly conduct of its schools."[3] There is a tendency today to attach strong sociological overtones to vandalism and relate it specifically to the protest movement.[4] It is small wonder that vandalism in many places is a matter of high administrative priority.

Several knowledgeable administrators have categorized the phenomenon of vandalism by its motivating factors; e.g. careless, wanton, predatory, vindictive, or political vandalism. Some distinction among these types

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[1] Eugene Register-Guard, Oregon, October 14, 1971, p.9A, reporting research by editors of Education U.S.A.

[2] "Surging Vandalism: Its Expense to America," U.S. News, August 25, 1969.

[3] High School Principals Association of New York City Schools--A Report submitted January 21, 1969. Reported in "Anarchy in New York City Schools," U.S. News, February 3, 1969.

[4] See article by Stanley Cohen, "Politics of Vandalism," Nation, November 11, 1968.

may be helpful for the formulation of policy statements and procedural steps in handling a variety of cases. However, the thrust of this material will deal only with malicious or willful destruction of school property, regardless of motivation.

Certain general aspects should be considered first: (1) the delegation of authority for vandalism control; (2) the control of vandalism by architectural planning; and (3) use of indestructible materials in construction and equipment which will reduce vandalism. This discussion will be followed by suggestions for handling vandalism cases and by recommendations for practical deterrents to vandalism, both short-range and long-range. Points included are security staff, lighting, fencing, alarm systems, activities, student and community support, and eradication of causes.

GENERAL PLANNING

Who Is In Charge?

Leonard Schmurr, Director of the Special Investigation Department of Portland Public Schools, emphasizes the importance of specifically delegating local school and district-wide responsibility for this problem. He says, "Someone must have responsibility for working with the overall problem of vandalism. Then the responsibility for his own actions has to be passed along to the greatest degree possible to the vandal or the potential vandal." In other words, Mr. Schmurr is saying that a specific individual needs to be responsible for foresighted planning on-the-spot investigation and carry-through. This includes dealing with the perpetrator(s) and with all others concerned. This authority may be

structured differently depending on district size. In many situations the "responsible person" will be the superintendent himself, supported by other responsible staff members, students, security men, and citizens of the community. But the concept of "one responsible person" is agreed upon by many schoolmen.

What of Construction?

The fact that school vandalism has not yet become a major concern is no reason to ignore the problem or assume future immunity. Many a peaceful community has experienced the arrival of serious vandalism almost overnight.[5] Foresighted planning and preventive measures in these days of general societal unrest simply make good sense.

Many school administrators are now considering the use of non-destructible materials as well as different architectural designs, such as inner courts and less accessible roofs for the protection of more vulnerable areas. The report by the editors of Education, U.S.A., "Violence and Vandalism," states that "windowless schools alleviate high loss of window breakage and time required for maintenance." The study also mentions that windowless schools are safer because they eliminate injuries from broken glass.

In a number of large cities, glass windows are being, or have been replaced by plastic ones. Notable among these are Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Kansas City, Missouri, Milwaukee, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Dayton, and Syracuse.[6] Raymond Hudson of New York City comments that

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[5]See, for example, Parma, Ohio, reported in "Ways of Fighting Vandalism," Today's Education, December 1968.

[6]U. S. News, August 25, 1969, op, cit.

glass substitutes such as acrylic and polycarbonate have been very effective in reducing glass breakage.

For other uses, hard-to-damage materials are gaining widespread use. For instance, seat covers in buses are being redone with fiberglass materials which are more difficult to damage. Harry B. Saunders, Director of School Building Planning in the Los Angeles City District, reports that their protective measures include "window security screens" and "selection of building materials and furnishings that are as vandal-free as possible." These methods are in addition to their replacement of window glass with Lexon plastic and their windowless design for new buildings.

Ron Donahue, Superintendent of Parks and Recreation in Fremont, Nebraska,[7] suggests that the use of heavy paint to produce a tile-like finish has been found to discourage defacement (hard to write on); that some walls have been painted lipstick red to defy would-be "artists;" and that equipment has been enameled with distinctive color in order to minimize thefts.

Contrary to the above philosophy of building an impregnable school is that typified by Robert Lloyd, Director of Special Projects and Programs in Baltimore.[8] He highly recommends bright-colored, porcelain-enamel finish and attractive steel paneling in educational facilities as preventives to school vandalism. He points out that beautiful new buildings in the district have scarcely been damaged while the conventional brick and mortar schools have been heavily vandalized.

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[7]"How to Handle Vandalism," Camping Magazine, May 1968.

[8]"Ways of Fighting Vandalism," op. cit.

This raises the question of whether the factor of pride in a facility and its program may not be of greater significance in control of vandalism than physical impregnability. Perhaps the beauty of new buildings may not be the exclusive feature that successfully wards off vandalism. The chances are good that staff and student body work together to agree on the need for protection and appreciation of their new facilities. Nevertheless, the tendency for pride in that which is new and worth preserving is a factor on which schools should capitalize.

PROCEDURES IN HANDLING CASES

"When someone defaces a desk in my classroom, I make him (or her) responsible for undoing the deed," one teacher remarked.

"Vandals (or their parents) are made to pay for or repair the damage," others add.

Who Does What in Handling Vandalism?

It is important for students to understand that legally they are under direct authority of the school staff and that they be informed of the means by which vandalism will be dealt with and the sanctions which may be imposed. It is equally important in many localities to minimize potential interference from outside the school by screening all visitors and removing from the premises all loiterers with no official business.

Equipment needed to deal with actual cases of vandalism may include such items as effective in-school communication devices, cameras and print-outs of laws and ordinances citing legal authority for administrative action. Selected members of the faculty and other respected persons in authority may well make up an internal security system especially alert to vandalism and ways of checking it quickly.

Swift decisive administrative action is necessary. But as Mr. Schmurr of the Portland Public Schools points out, so are "apprehension, quick attention by the courts, effective community censure, and reimbursement for loss."

What Is Your Policy?

In some states, the board of education requires that school districts have a written plan of action for protection against violence and vandalism. These plans include notification of legal rights as well as procedural steps to be taken. Local police also should be enlisted to work cooperatively with persons in authority to formulate appropriate measures both for prevention and handling of vandalism matters in which they are involved.

DETERRENTS TO VANDALISM

Aside from procedural steps to place in effect in cases of vandalism, a long-range design to deter vandalism is a wise administrative precaution. Such a preventive plan may be prompted by some a serious problem or it may be established in advance as part of precautionary measures.

How Is Your Security System?

In the Los Angeles School District, which serves 750,000 pupils in some 620 different school sites, the following measures have been added to tighten their security system: installation of surveillance and intrusion alarm systems; increase in security guards; and extending hours of custodial time so that buildings are occupied longer.

Richard Curren[9] describes how a security system operates in Parma, Ohio, (pop. 100,000), where vandalism had become a serious problem almost overnight. Each building in that district is equipped with a radar alarm system which, when touched off, results in a series of sirens and flashing lights and in a summons for the police. The alarm system is activated with a key each night.

But the security planning goes far beyond the alarm system itself. Each principal informs the superintendent's office daily of any school activity in his building in order that the central office may be aware of all planned use of buildings. All school personnel are responsible for reporting immediately (to principal or superintendent) any suspicious person(s) seen loitering on school property. Furthermore, two security guards each patrol 15 buildings at least twice a night, taking care not to follow any set travel pattern. The school district receives police patrol protection from three municipalities that comprise the district. Any successful, well-structured security system is psychologically impressive to the student body and taken seriously by all school personnel.

Seattle, Washington, has experimented with an alarm system that uses radar-and-sound monitoring which is controlled from a single center. This system serves a dual purpose--during the normal day, as a direct-line communications system between schools and a monitoring point in the administration building, and during after-school time, as a burglar alarm.

A highly organized student security system in Akron, Ohio, works closely with the Highway Patrol and police force, as well as with the

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[9] Ibid.

school board to formulate appropriate security objectives and procedures. The system, consisting of 71 junior and senior student captains and some 2,000 class chairmen, is especially alert at Hallowe'en and during vacation periods. Morale is reported to be extremely high and the program has been evaluated as "an enormous success."[10]

Rochester, New York, has a security program called "Teens on Patrol," which employs 100 teenagers to work with police, while Mesquite, Texas, and Detroit, Michigan, rely strongly on their electronic warning systems.[11]

What About Lighting, Fencing, and Such?

One administrator has stated that a high wattage, well-placed light is worth five employed custodians or guards. As a result some authorities leave lights on the buildings all night. San Francisco has improved the lighting in vandal-ridden areas. Baltimore has not only expanded their security staff, but also has installed such preventive devices as outside lighting, fencing, window guards, and alarm systems. In addition, the district resorts to playground cleaning with power sweepers to remove stones and other potential "ammunition."[12]

Mr. Leonard Schmurr of Portland, Oregon, feels that extra lighting without surveillance by responsible people may prove of little value, and that fences, equipped with gates that lock, must be at least eight feet high to be effective. Also, according to Mr. Schmurr, the grounds, large enough around the building to afford some protection, will have to

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[10] Ibid.

[11] U.S. News, August 25, 1969, op. cit.

[12] Today's Education, op. cit.

be ruled off-limits to the general public. He further suggests that fencing can also be effective inside buildings to limit access to certain areas vulnerable to vandalism and theft when open to the public.

Harry Saunders of Los Angeles suggests that "our experience has proven . . . that fencing of school sites is a deterrent to minor vandalism as well as a safety device to prevent children from running into streets after balls." Los Angeles uses 8-foot, chain-link fences on all sites. Saunders adds,

> Chain-link fencing provides some security in terms of theft and major vandalism but in no way prevents it. It will only slow down the thief or vandal; it will not stop him.

Raymond Hudson states that New York City uses chain-link fencing for several purposes--protection of landscaping, protection of school buildings from playyard areas, and protection of neighborhood homes from baseballs and handballs. As to lighting, Hudson mentions that

> Lighting in most areas is reasonably effective in reducing vandalism. There is a program here to floodlight the buildings from adjacent street light standards. Where they are not adaptable, floodlights have been installed on the roof.

What Activities Are Deterrents?

Robert Dispenza, City Recreation Director of Rochester, New York, insists that vandalism should be treated as a symptom. He says, "Find out why it occurs. Our policemen visit play areas regularly--as friends, not disciplinarians. We talk with both youngsters and parents." On the basis of what is learned, neighborhood committees are organized and changes are suggested in school program and personnel.

The program at Burbank Junior High School in Houston is built on a sense of pride in the usefulness and beauty of the school. "We are

proud not only of our physical plant and grounds but also of our students and alums, and we tell them so," says Assistant Principal Jessie R. Harper.[13] Specifically, the faculty relates to them through (1) pep talks by coaches in gym classes on honesty, pride, and good manners; (2) talks by former students (now policemen) on immediate and long-range effects of one simple act of thievery; (3) encouragement to be on guard against vandalism and thievery; (4) invitations extended to parents and alums to visit and observe pupils in action. Harper adds, "Both physical plant and grounds remain beautiful."

Community Involvement. From Alpena, Michigan (pop. 20,000) comes a similar report of a long-range program involving the community. Robert Buchner,[14] English teacher, states that vandalism in their school district is not significant--partly because it is isolated from urban areas, but also partly because of their program known as Community Schools, originating with the Mott Program. This program strives to involve all citizens from pre-schoolers to senior citizens in some form of educational activities. As a result of this program most buildings are kept open and available during non-school hours; instructional talents among community resource persons as well as teachers are utilized; and opportunities for institutional learning and fun are provided--e.g. classes in arts and humanities, flower arranging, dog training, and fly tying. In other words, the accent is on the positive side of school use rather than abuse.

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

In Akron, Ohio, the civic "Touchdown Club" of 1,000 members has as its purpose "to encourage greater athletic opportunity for boys and girls through better school programs . . . To seek to give youngsters a sense of responsibility for supporting fair play, decency, respect for law and for applying the educational advantages afforded them." It is this club that sponsors the highly organized preventive programs during vacation, "Youth Vacation Vigil" and at Hallowe'en, "Fun Versus Vandalism," which involves 71 school captains and 2,000 class chairmen from the ten high schools. Such involvement and cooperation of citizens and students may, in part, account for the high morale which reportedly exists in the school.[15]

Enlistment of Outside Agencies.[16] A source of strong support may be found in certain other outside agencies which take an interest in promoting the protection of school property. For example, the Pacific Region Insurance Information Institute suggests the following measures as deterrents to vandalism:

1. Ask people living near schools to report any suspicious activities.
2. Impress on parents the cost of vandalism. Encourage them to watch their own children more carefully.
3. Keep school buildings open and occupied as long as possible, encouraging the use of buildings by members of the community.
4. Seek frequent checks by police and employ private watchmen as needed.
5. Equip outside doors with unbreakable panes and tamper-proof locks.
6. Seek full cooperation from students.

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[15] Ibid.

[16] U.S. News, August 25, 1969, op. cit.

Other similar groups have urged that schools and churches attempt to convince the younger generation of the senselessness of vandalism and the need for a concerted assault on this tremendous economic waste.

CONCLUSION

"VANDALISM AND LOOTING FOLLOW PIRATE VICTORY"

"RIOTS AT WRIGLEY FIELD"

"YANKEE STADIUM SCENE OF BEDLAM"

When vandalism becomes an accepted part of a national pattern in the adult world, it is hardly surprising to find its counterpart on public school campuses.

To some extent, the movement seems to be part of a larger societal rebellion and an off-shoot of the current revolution against the impersonal nature of the Establishment. But if something good is to emerge from a revolutionary spirit, it needs to come chiefly through the avenues of education, both in-school education and out-of-school education, and by joint efforts of schoolmen, students, and community. However, THE PHENOMENON OF VANDALISM IS IN MANY PLACES SERIOUSLY IMPAIRING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION TODAY. Granville Woodson, Assistant Superintendent of schools in Washington, D. C., says, "Every dollar we spend because of vandalism is a dollar we cannot spend to improve education."[17] So careful planning, firm decisions and devices are definitely needed.

At the same time, the control of vandalism must include a systematic inquiry as to causes and an unbiased investigation of who is involved and what these youth are really trying to tell us by their actions.

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[17] Ibid.

Edwin Lemert holds that while tradition demands that society operate on the premise that deviancy must necessarily lead to social controls, it is important to remember "social controls (also) lead to deviance . . . a potentially richer premise for studying deviance in modern society."[18]

In a large mid-western high school, a series of fires broke out in the bookroom a few years ago. Administrators felt that the cause of these obvious cases of arson might be traced to youthful rebellion against textbooks, other inhibiting restraints, or the obsolescence of the facility. But the outbreak might also have had its origin in the feisty attitude of the personnel employed in the bookroom, who in their frustrated attempt at absolute perfection, coupled with a tendency toward racism, seemed to engender a constant atmosphere of antagonism among the students served. The possible relationship of vandalism as an almost predictable result of an inconsiderate or a brutalizing attitude on the part of some school personnel toward youth should not be overlooked.

Sociologist Stanley Cohen points out, "Most research into school vandalism indicates that there is something wrong with the school that is damaged. The highest rates of school vandalism tend to occur in schools with obsolete facilities and equipment, low staff morale, and high degree of dissatisfaction and boredom among pupils."[19]

Perhaps in the final analysis, says Wilhelmina Thomas, Principal of Walker-Jones Elementary School in Washington, D. C., the best "weapon"

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[18] Nation, November 11, 1968, op. cit.

[19] Ibid.

in vandalism control is student and parental pride.[20] By letting participants share in planning and realizing the institutional needs of the school and community--or by arousing enthusiasm for a beautification program requiring consistent care of the building and surrounding areas (plants, shrubbery, flowers), good morale may be established, a sense of student responsibility built, and vandalism may be substantially decreased.

To beautify or to barricade: That is the question. Each administrator must be alert to the uniqueness of his own local situation. While reasonable precautions may have been adequate in the past, long-range planning is a must for the challenges posed by increasing vandalism today. At many schools it would still be ridiculous if not dangerous to build an eight-foot fence topped by barbed wire. At another school it may be hard to rely on locally developed school pride alone.

In attacking the problem of school vandalism, an administrator should first identify the problem for what it is--a school-community challenge. This immediately suggests a cooperative task force approach by representatives of all concerned: students, faculty, parents, custodians, police, administrators, and the press. Any effort to resolve such challenges on a piece-meal and patch-work basis will prove to be of limited value.

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[20] Today's Education, op. cit.